

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SIKHS

**An Era of Super-Eminence in Martyrdom
in Sikh History**

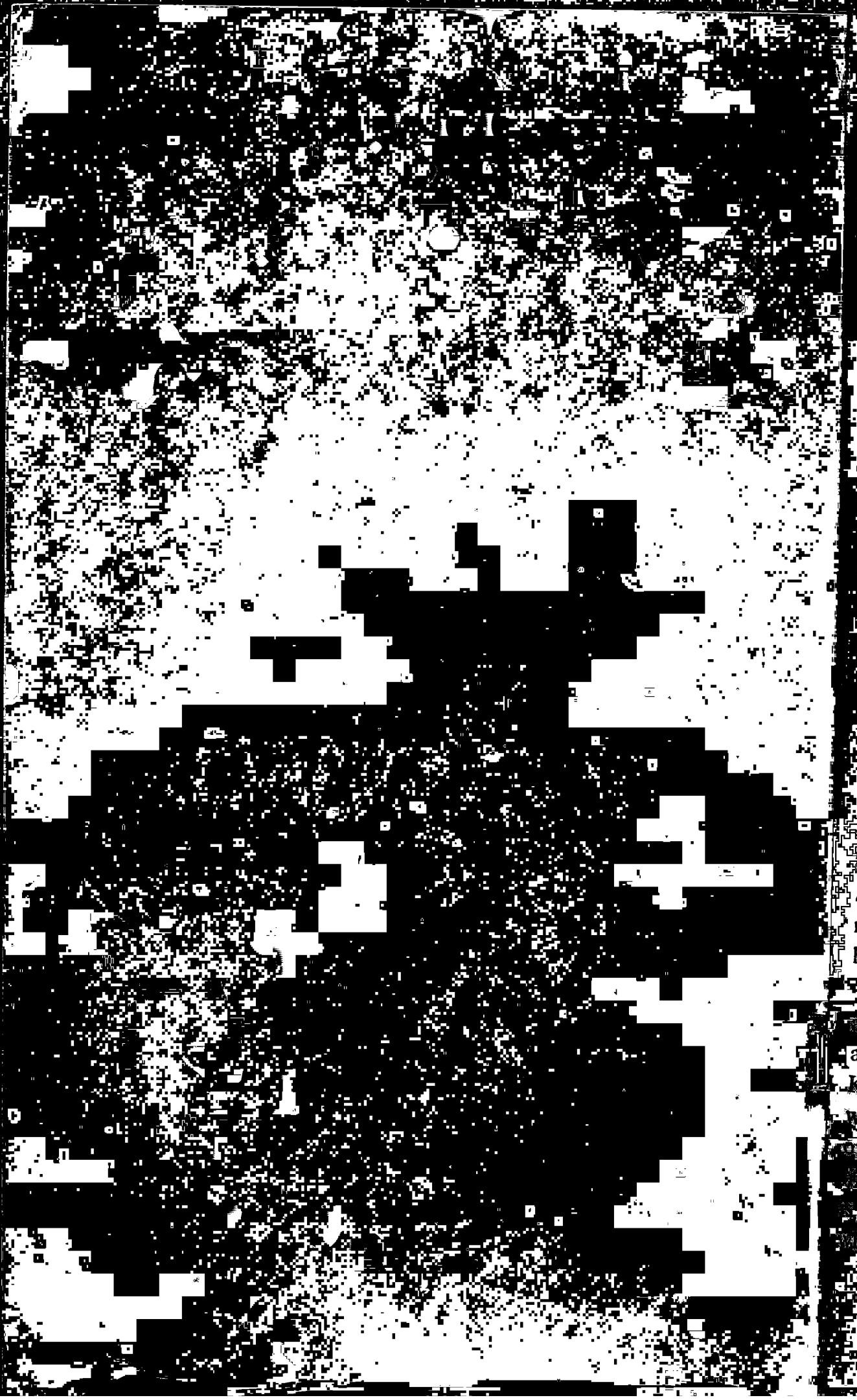
DR. S. S. KOHLI



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Prof. Dr. Haroun Singh Suhi
Principal Project Investigator
U.G.C. Research Project on Sikhs
SOS, Sector 16, Chandigarh

ACADEMY OF SIKH RELIGION AND CULTURE
1, Dhillon Marg, Bhupinder Nagar
PATIALA



Eighteenth Century Sikhs

An Era of Super-Eminence in Martyrdom in Sikh History

—Dr. S. S. KOHLI

The Concept of a Martyr in Sikhism

The word prevalent for ‘martyr’ in India is *Shahid*, which connotes ‘one who is present as a witness’. *Ash-Shahidul-Kamil* or perfect martyr is considered one who is killed in a religious war. The word *Shahid* is an Arabic word. It was given a wide interpretation in Muslim India. In *Qanoon-i-Islam* by Shrreef different ways for the attainment of martyrdom are mentioned which include the death while reciting prayers, death at the hands of robbers, death by lightning, death by drowning or falling into a dry well. But one who died in the defence of his faith was considered a perfect martyr. In Sikhism, the word *Shahid* was adopted in the sense of a perfect matyr. The muslims who died in battle with infidels or Hindus were considered *Shahids*. But in Sikhism there is a wider connotation for the word *Shahid*. A Sikh who suffers death by refusing to renounce his faith, religion, tenet or principle or its practice is a *Shahid*. He seals his testimony for his faith with his blood.

Bhai Gurdas, while defining a true disciple, describes him as a martyr in endurance and faith, having ended all his illusions and fears. Once the Sikhs asked Guru Gobind Singh, “O True King, who may be called martyrs ? Kindly tell us their nature of work.” The Guru smiled and said, “You have put a question on a confidential matter, O Sikhs. The Guru keeps his people in his presence. He protects his disciples. The present is the dreadful Iron Age. The Guru is like a shepherd who cautions and scares away his followers. The Guru goads

his Sikhs according to his will. If the Sikh has full faith, he is a hero of the field and crossed the world-ocean. The cowards are fettered in transmigration. The Guru shall wait alongwith his people. Whatever the martyrs desire, is fulfilled. God has placed many of them in responsible positionsThey wonder in all the *Dripas* and *Khanda*, but are never led astray. They see the sport of *maya*, but are not subject to transmigration. The Guru is there to protect them. He protects them like a shepherd."

Martyrdom in Sikhism prior to eighteenth century

The fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev was the first martyr in Sikh History. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir had himself ordered his death with tortures. He wrote in his *Fuzuk*: "So many of the simple minded Hindus, nay, many foolish muslims too, had been fascinated by his ways and teachings. He was noised about as a religious and worldly leader. They called him Guru, and from all directions crowds of fool world came to him and expressed great devotion to him. This busy traffic had been carried on for three or four generations. For years the thought had been presenting itself to my mind that either I should put an end to this false traffic, or he should be brought into the fold of Islam ...I fully knew his heresies, and I ordered that he should be brought into my presence, that his houses and children be made over to Murtaze Khan, that his property be confiscated, and that he should be put to death with tortures." It is said that the Guru was handed over to Chandu Shah, who had also become inimical towards him because of a private matter. The adversary subjected the Guru to various kinds of tortures. Hot sand was poured over his body and he was made to sit on a hot iron-plate. The blistered body of the Guru was then put in the cold waters of the Ravi, which 'carried it away to its final rest.' The first martyrdom gave more strength to the Sikh movement. Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru were two swords of *miri* (temporal greatness) and *piri* (spiritual grandeur).

The second martyr in Sikh History was Guru Tegh Bahadur,

the ninth Sikh Guru. The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb tried to convert him to Islam, but the Guru remained steadfast on his principles. He gave his life in order to protect the freedom of the Hindu religion. In the words of Guru Gobind Singh : "He (Guru Tegh Bahadur) protected the forehead mark and sacred thread (of the Hindus), which marked a great event in the Iron Age. For the sake of saints, he laid down his head without even a sigh. For the sake of Dharma (righteousness) he sacrificed himself; he laid down his head, but not his creed. The saints of the Lord abhor the performance of miracles and malpractices. Breaking the pot of his body on the head of the King of Delhi (Aurangzeb), he left for the abode of the Lord. None could perform such a feat. The whole world bemoaned the departure of Tegh Bahadur, while the world lamented, the gods hailed his arrival in heaven." This martyrdom further strengthened the Sikh Movement. The Sikhs arrested with the Guru were also subjected to severe tortures. Bhai Mati Das was sawn alive and Bhai Dayala was boiled in a huge cauldron.

Eighteenth Century Martyrs

Guru Gobind Singh—the first martyr of the Century

The first martyr of the eighteenth century was Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs and the founder of the Khalsa. He had taken up the sword like his grandfather after the martyrdom of his father. His fight against the tyrants was for the spread of Dharma (righteousness) and protection of the saints. He founded the Khalsa in order to root out the evil and evil-doers. For the accomplishment of his mission, he sacrificed his parents, himself and his sons. After the battle of Chamkaur, the Mughal forces pursued him closely for several days without any success. From Dina, he sent a letter entitled *Zafarnama* (Epistle of Victory) to Aurangzeb, in which he wrote, "Your army breaking the oath and in great haste, plunged in the battlefield with arrows and guns. For this reason, I had to intervene and had to come fully armed. When all other methods fail it is proper to hold the sword in the hand.....How could the

brave ultimately withstand in the field, when only forty were surrounded by innumerable warriors .. What, if you have killed my four sons, the hooded cobra still sits coiled up” Several Sikhs had laid down their lives in the battles of Bhangani, Nadaun, Anandpur etc. and had shown great feats in the battlefield. When the Guru left Anandpur, he was separated from a part of his family. His two younger sons Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh alongwith their grandmother took shelter with an old servant, who betrayed them. He handed them over to the Muslim Governor of Sirhind. The Governor inhumanly tortured the young children and got them bricked alive. The grandmother could not survive because of the severe shock. Baba Ajit Singh and Bhai Udai Singh fought bravely on the banks of Sirsa, where Bhai Udai Singh fell in the field killing many enemies. Guru then encamped in the fortress of Chamkaur, where several brave warriors attained martyrdom in the battlefield alongwith Ajit Singh and Jujhar Singh, the two elder sons of the Guru. The Guru fought his last battle at Muktsar in Ferozepur district, in which the pursuing Mughal forces were defeated. The forty warriors of Majha, who had earlier deserted the ranks of the Guru during the siege of Anandpur, having been taunted by their womenfolk had reinforced the Guru’s small army and attained martyrdom. They were blessed by the Guru and their ‘disclaimer’ was torn up. These forty are daily remembered in the Sikh prayer as *Chali Mukte the Forty Saved Ones.*

On an invitation from Aurangzeb, the Guru started for Deccan, but the king died soon after and his son Bahadur Shah sought the help of Guru. After defeating his adversaries, Bahadur Shah ascended the throne. The guilty Nawab of Sirhind, who had killed the two younger sons of the Guru, fearing the displeasure of the king on account of his friendship with the Guru, sent two Pathans who pursued the Guru, when he proceeded towards Deccan with the king. Finding an opportunity one day at Nander, one of the Pathans stabbed the Guru. Though the wounds of the Guru were healed within a few days

after the attack, they burst open causing profuse bleeding, when one day the Guru tried to bend a steel bow. The end of the worldly life of the Guru came on October 7, 1708. The line of the personal Guruship ended with this. The Guruship had been bestowed upon the *Adi Granth*.

Guru Gobind Singh was the third Guru to attain Martyrdom. The chain of martyrdoms following the death of the founder of the Khalsa within the eighteenth century is unique in the history of the world. The Khalsa moved fearlessly on the soil of Punjab, always keeping its head on its palm for the protection of truth, justice and righteousness. The tortures inflicted on the brave Khalsa were very severe, but the endurance and passive resistance of the mighty spirits was not lacking.

The martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur

While in Deccan, Guru Gobind Singh himself had converted Banda Bairagi to Sikhism and had baptised as Banda Singh. He was sent on to Punjab with the object of punishing the evildoers and tyrants. The Guru's objective was conveyed to the Sikhs in Punjab, who accepted Banda Singh as their commander. Several successful battles were fought against the enemy. Khafi Khan says, "Not a man of the army of Islam escaped with more than his life and clothes he stood in. Horsemen and footmen fell under the swords of the infidels (forces of Banda Singh), who pursued them as far as Sirhind which was thereafter conquered and razed to the ground. Then after humiliating Gangetic Doab, the Sikh forces occupied Jullundur Doab. After that there was Haidri Flag crusade. The mullas of Lahore raised a green banner named *Haidri Flag* and proclaimed a crusade against the Sikhs. These *Ghazis* were ultimately defeated by the Sikh forces. Then the royal forces were called in. A fierce battle was fought at Lohgarh, after which the Sikh forces retreated towards the hills of Nahan.

Farrukh Siyar became the king in the beginning of 1713 after internecine struggle in the royal family after the death of Bahadur Shah in 1712. During the reign of Bahadur Shah

there were imperial orders for the extermination of the Sikhs. Farrukh Siyar appointed Abdus Samad Khan as she Governor of Lahore, who began to hunt the Sikhs everywhere. In the beginning of 1715 Banda Singh reappeared in the plains. His forces came under a siege in the fort of Gurdas Nangal. Because of the exhaustion of the provisions, Banda Singh and his men had to face heavy odds. Ultimately on December 7, 1715, Banda and his famished men were taken prisoners. At first they were taken to Lahore and then sent to Delhi. The execution of the Sikhs began on 5th March, 1716. It is said that one hundred Sikhs were executed every day. The author of *Siyarul-Mutaakhirin* says : "But what is singular, these people not only behaved firmly during the execution but they would dispute and wrangle with each other for priority in death, and they made interest with the executioner to obtain the preference." The carnage went on for a whole week. In the case of a newly married young man the mother appeared before the king requesting him to release her son as according to her, he was not a Sikh. The king granted her request, but when the orders for the release of the young man were presented before the Kotwal, the youngman cried out : "My mother is a liar, I am undoubtedly a Sikh". The turn of Banda Singh came on June 9, 1716. It is said that his son Ajai Singh was hacked to death and cut into pieces before his very eyes and taking out the throbbing heart of the child, thrust it into the mouth of Banda 'who stood unmoved like a statue, completely resigned to the Will of God.' As regards Banda himself, he was deprived first of his right eye, then his left eye, after which his hands and feet were cut off. His flesh was torn with red-hot pincers and in the end his head was chopped off.

Further Persecutions and Martyrdoms

After the death of Banda, a general order was issued by Farrukh Siyar that the Sikhs be completely extirpated. A reward was fixed for the head of a Sikh. The Sikhs wearing long hair, therefore, disappeared into hills and forests. When the situation eased a little, they came down on the plains. They

used to assemble at Darbar Sahib, Amritsar on the occasion of Baisakhi and Diwali. In 1721, Bhai Mani Singh became the head priest of Darbar Sahib. In 1726, Abdus Samad Khan was transferred to Multan, and in his place Zakrya Khan, his son, known as 'Khan Bahadur' became the Governor of Lahore. Zakrya Khan adopted stronger measures for the extirpation of the Sikhs completely, so that the trouble on their account may end once for all. He fixed a price on the head of a Sikh. The Sikhs who came in the grip of the authorities, were given severe tortures in various ways. They were beheaded in public and their heads were piled up in *Shahid-Ganj* (treasure-troves of martyrdom) outside Delhi Gate. Having been outlawed, they again went away to the forests. According to Rattan Singh Bhangoo they had no hearths, no homes, no property, but they lived in the hope that one day they would be the rulers of the land. The other suppressed people still had sympathy for them and many of them joined the Khalsa brotherhood.

Martyrdom of Tara Singh of Van

Tara Singh of Van was an ideal Sikh, a great public servant, audacious and bold. He was very popular with the Sikhs and fearlessly helped his brethren in distress. Sahib Rai of Nourshera, living in the neighbourhood used abusive language for the Sikhs, when he was asked not to trespass his horses in the green fields of Tara Singh. The Sikhs, highly infuriated, caught and sold away one of his mares. On the complaint from Sahib Rai, the Faujdar of Patti sent a detachment against Tara Singh, which was waylaid by the Sikh warriors in the way. Then the Faujdar requisitioned a larger force from the Governor of Lahore. Though Sardar Tara Singh received a secret message from the Sikhs of Lahore but he refused to move to a safer place and died fighting bravely with the Mughal army alongwith his 22 men. The Sikhs vowed to wreak their vengeance for this onslaught and looted the revenue money meant for Government treasury.

Under such circumstances of persecution and revenge,

#of Dr. Harnam Singh Shab
Principal Project Investigator
U.G.C. Research Project on Sikhism
505, Sector 16 Chandigarh

Zakrya Khan made a proposal to the Delhi Government that the Sikhs be given a grant and a title be conferred on their leader. After acceptance of this proposal, the Nawabship was conferred on Sardar Kapur Singh of Faisullapur. This gave a breathing time to the Sikhs. They organised themselves and the combined force of Budha Dal and Taruna Dal inflicted a heavy defeat on the Mughal army under the command of Lakhpat Rai.

Martyrdom of Bhai Mani Singh

In 1738, Bhai Mani Singh was permitted to hold the Diwali festival in the Golden Temple on the condition that he would pay Rupees five thousand to the Government after the fair. In response to the invitation many Sikhs gathered. Since the forces entered the city (of Amritsar) during the fair, the Sikhs left in haste. The fair broke up. Bhai Mani Singh was arrested, because of the non-payment of the fixed amount. He was asked either to accept Islam or face death. The great Sikh savant refused to barter his religion. His body was hacked to pieces, limb by limb. A few companions also suffered martyrdom with him.

Because of the renewed persecutions, the Sikhs took shelter in the Shivalik hills. At this time Nadir Shah devastated the land upto Delhi. After his departure, Zakrya Khan again launched an all-out campaign against the Sikhs. One Massa Ranghar took possession of the Golden Temple and turned the holy place into a dancing house. This desecration of the holy temple infuriated the Sikhs. Mahtab Singh and Sukha Singh disguised themselves as Muhammedans and entering the temple, cut off the head of the tyrant.

Martyrdom of Bhai Taru Singh

Bhai Taru Singh aged twenty-five was a pious and devoted Sikh of village Poola of Majha. He worked in his fields and sent the produce to the common kitchen of his Sikh brethren. The Government considered it an act of treason. He was arrested and brought to Lahore. The tyrants tried to cut off his hair forcibly on the orders of Zakrya Khan. The hair had

to be scraped off his scalp. This ordeal was faced by Bhai Taru Singh with great endurance. Zakrya Khan had died a few hours before him by a fatal disease.

Martyrdom of Mehtab Singh of Mirankot, Subeg Singh and Shahbaz Singh

Mehtab Singh of Mirankot, who had killed Massa Rangar, was captured and brought to Lahore and was publicly broken on the wheel on the orders of Zakrya Khan, who could not see the end of his other victims, who had been brought before him. These victims were Subeg Singh, an influential Zemidar of Jambar and his son Shahbaz Singh. The boy was a student in a Muhammedan school under a Qazi. The Qazi wished to convert the boy to Islam, but the boy refused. Then a charge was cooked up against him like Haqiqat Rai Dharmi (the virtuous) who suffered martyrdom eleven years earlier in 1734. Yahiya Khan, the son of Zakrya Khan, who became the Governor of Lahore after him, was also relentless and cruel like his father. He also got Subeg Singh arrested on a trumped up charge. He also refused to accept Islam. Both the father and son were bound to the wheel and turned on it. The slashing knives of the wheel finished both of them in a short while.

The First Holocaust

Lakhpur Rai continued as Diwan under Yahiya Khan. When his brother Jaspur Rai, the Faujdar of Eminabad, was killed and the town was looted by the Sikhs, Lakhpur Rai became mad with rage. He got a general proclamation issued for the extirpation of the Sikhs. All the Sikhs of Lahore were arrested and executed. A huge Mughal army, under the command of Yahiya Khan and Lakhpur Rai pursued the Sikh warriors in the marshes of Kahnuwan and pushed them towards Ravi. After crossing the river, the Sikhs went towards the hills of Basohli, where they came under the attack of hillmen under the instruction from the Government. There was no other way left. They had either to take refuge in the steep mountain or to cut their way back through the advancing

Mughal forces. Many Sikhs were killed and the others had to face great hardships. About seven thousand were killed and three thousand were taken prisoners. The prisoners were subjected to great indignity and torture. In this campaign, the Sikhs suffered a heavy loss for the first time. It is therefore called a *ghalughara* or a holocaust, But it was a *Chhota ghalughara*, because the bigger one had yet to be experienced. This holocaust occurred in 1746.

In 1747, Yahiya Khan was ousted by his younger brother Shah Nawaz Khan, who put Lakhpat Rai into prison. The Mughal Government did not recognise Shah Nawaz as the Governor of Lahore. Therefore he invited Ahmed Shah Durrani the ruler of Kabul, who reached Lahore in January 1748. Because of this new arrangement, the Sikhs got respite for some time. Dewan Kaura Mal was a Sikh at heart, therefore, there were no incidents of serious nature as long as he lived, except the siege of Ram Rauni, in which about two hundred Sikhs were killed.

Dewan Kaura Mal died in 1752 in an expedition against Durranis. Ahmed Shah Durrani had made the third excursion against the Mughals. Mir Mannu, feeling secure in his position as Governor of Lahore and seeing the rising power of the Sikhs, resorted to vigorous measures against them. On his orders about nine hundred Sikhs who had taken refuge in the fortress of Ram Rauni, were killed. The Sikhs were hunted and hammered to death with wooden clubs. Even the Sikh women were tortured and their children were cut to pieces before their very eyes. But none of them abandoned their religion. Hundreds of Sikh men and women were killed at *Shahid Ganj* outside Delhi Gate. A popular saying of the Sikhs of the period still abides, in which it is said, "Mannu is our sickle and we are a crop to be mowed by him; the more he cuts us, the more we grow." The tyrant himself was caught in the noose of death in November 1753. Then started the internecine struggles among the Muslim chiefs and further invasions of the Durrani. In this state of confusion, the Sikhs took advantage of the

situation. The Durrani King had the upper hand because of the weakness of Delhi Government. He installed his son Taimur Shah as the Viceroy of Indian possessions. Because of the repeated excursions of the Sikhs, a crusade was proclaimed against the Sikhs. There were losses on both sides.

The Sikh chiefs consolidated their power to an appreciable extent during the fifties and sixties of the eighteenth century, inspite of persecutions and skirmishes against them. It was during the sixth invasion of the Durrani king in February 1762, that the great holocaust or *wadda ghalughara* took place.

Second Holocaust know as Wadda Ghalughara

During the annual Diwali gathering at Amritsar in October, 1761 it was resolved that the strongholds of the supporters of the Durrani king be destroyed. In pursuance of this *gurmatta*, the nearest stronghold was that of the *Niranjanis* whose Guru Agil Das of Jandiala came to know of the Sikh resolve. Instead of making a compromise with the Sikhs, he invited the Durrani king, who was already on his way to India. The Sikhs withdrew hurriedly with their families and wanted to reach a safer place. The Shah pursued them and overtook them near Malerkotla, where nearly thirty thousand Sikhs had encamped with their families and belongings. The orders were given for killing anyone in Indian dress. Several thousand Sikhs, mostly women and children were killed here. Those who survived kept moving further, while fighting, in order to save their families. They wanted to reach Barnala, but before they could reach there, their cordon was pierced by the invaders and a wholesale massacre followed. It is said that at least ten thousand Sikhs met their death in this carnage or *wadda ghalughara*. It is said that when the Shah returned to Lahore in the beginning of March, 1762, he brought with him fifty carts filled with the heads of the massacred Sikhs and a large number of captives. To punish the Sikhs further, he desecrated the Amritsar temple. The temple had also been desecrated earlier and the sacred tank had been filled up. The reports of such sacrilege had infuriated the Sikhs. Baba Deep Singh and Baba Gurbaksh Singh

suffered martyrdom in 1760 in the battle of Ramsar in the city of Amritsar.

But the Sikhs recouped within a short period. They avenged the pollution of their most sacred places. Then followed a period of Sikh conquests and hearing about the Sikh victories. The Durrani king invaded India for the seventh time. The Sikhs moved away from the main route and went to Lakhi Jungle. But they did not completely absent themselves. There were several skirmishes with the Durrani forces during the stay of the Durrani king in India. It is said that he went to Chak Guru i. e. Amritsar to chastise the Sikhs there. But he did not find them there. There were about thirty Sikhs, who had been left in charge of *Akal Takht*. They were fearless persons. They sacrificed their lives for their Guru and every one of them died a martyr.

After the return of the Shah in March 1765, the Sikhs assembled at Amritsar on the Baisakhi day and resolved to take possession of Lahore. This was done in the month of April. Thus the foundation of a Sikh kingdom was laid. The galaxy of martyrs had not only contributed for such a victory, but also glorified their great religion by their sacrifices. A great future cannot be denied to the people, whose history is full of the splendid feats of the martyrs.

The final touch be given to this short description of the Sikh Martyrs of the eighteenth century by a quotation of Bhagat Lakshman Singh, the author of *Sikh Martyrs* : "The Sikh martyrs, by a magic wand, as it were, completely metamorphosed the society and the country that gave them birth. They completely changed the course of events in the time in which they lived, falsifying the much-talked-of and much-commented upon theory that great men are mere products of their times. Men looked upon them with awe and wonder. The Sikh name acquired a new significance and new dignity."

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Prof Dr. Harnam Singh Shan
Principal Project Investigator 12
U.G.C. Research Project on **Sikhism**
SOS. Sector 16, Chandigarh

PL-0600

